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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9411

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA IMMEDIATE 2788

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 0610

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 0486

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL IMMEDIATE 1065

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RHMFIISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE

RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEHC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 1309

RUEHVN/USMISSION USOSCE IMMEDIATE 1781

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 0563

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001008

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/24/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL EAID ECON KDEM TX

SUBJECT: SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: WHO IS PRESIDENT  
BERDIMUHAMEDOV?

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Classified By: Charge Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Little in the way of personal detail is known about the real President Berdimuhamedov, but examining rumors, official biographies and the comments of those who have worked with him provide some insight into his personality. Descended from Turkmen intelligentsia, Berdimuhamedov is a smart, detail-oriented professional bureaucrat and political survivor, who is most enthusiastic in addressing issues that he knows well. In respect to his working style, he operates very differently from the former president, but is similar to Niyazov in his ability to maneuver the complex clan-elite politics unique to this former Soviet republic. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) BERDIMUHAMEDOV THE MAN: The president appears to be different from his predecessor in many ways, but most notably in his family origins. Raised in a large, conservative, but atheistic family in Geok Depe, he seems to have been infused with a strong set of traditional family values. These values were reinforced by strong female and male role-model parents who were concurrently loyal to their ethnic Turkmen roots, loyal to the Soviet state, and well-educated. His official biography, published after he took office in February, credited his father with encouraging his only son to employ moderation and a gradual, well-considered pace in his decision-making processes.

¶3. (C) His traditional Turkmen nature also comes out with respect to his wife, who is rumored to be from the region of Mary. According to the precepts of Asian culture, next to nothing has been reported about Berdimuhamedov's wife and children. Rumors point to two women in his life, one Russian (possibly a mistress, but this is uncorroborated), and one

Turkmen. His Turkmen wife has been seen only once, when an embassy employee reported having seen her, in traditional clothing, alone with him in a car as they drove to a campaign event in Mary in early 2007. Some Turkmen postulate that their marriage may have been arranged, but it is notable that since taking office, Berdimuhamedov has appointed numerous officials who hail from the Mary region, as well as from Geok Depe.

**¶4. (C) BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S INTELLECT:** Some foreign visitors who have met with him since he took office as president have concluded after the discussions that he may not be that bright. However, his capacity to navigate complex subject matter may be limited by the quality of his briefing papers and his personal familiarity with the topic. Those who worked with Berdimuhamedov when he was health minister report he was a professional interlocutor who was engaged, positive, and receptive to proposals and suggestions, particularly those in the areas of health and education. However, there were also times when he, similar to other Turkmen officials long isolated from technical and scientific developments abroad, did not understand the nature of the proposal that NGOs or aid groups put forward. At least once, when a project presenter explained the details in more basic language, he complained of being "spoken to like a child."

**¶5. (C) BEARS A GRUDGE:** Many Turkmen have heard rumors that several years ago, Berdimuhamedov's son struck and killed a pedestrian while racing his car along Archabil Highway in Ashgabat. Berdimuhamedov is said to still hold a grudge against a senior official of the MNB, because he had been the official responsible for his son's temporary detention and had been unwilling negotiate for his son's release. Although there is no corroborating information, it is unlikely his son spent much time in jail, if any, and is now reportedly living

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abroad.

**¶6. (C) BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S PROFESSIONALISM:** Rumors abound regarding his intolerance of government functionaries who were insubordinate or lacked decorum. He was once rumored to have fired two female bureaucrats because they were whispering and laughing when he entered the room. Locally employed staff reported rumors that he requires female government functionaries to dress appropriately with arms and legs covered, and does not hesitate to criticize their choice of attire. A Turkmen citizen, who met with him regularly when he was Health Minister, described him as rank-conscious, particularly in terms of the deference and respect he expected from those subordinate to him. She said that he had a reputation for being a very demanding manager who instilled fear in his staff. She noted that he could be demonstrative when he became angry or frustrated, kicking things over and shouting, but said he had never become angry with her, perhaps because she was not in his chain of command.

**¶7. (C) A POLITICAL SURVIVOR:** Berdimuhamedov holds a remarkable record in having survived three different crises while a cabinet minister under Niyazov. In 2003, Niyazov publicly reprimanded him for his ministry's failure to improve the quality of new doctors, but he retained his post. In 2004, Niyazov again publicly criticized him and fined him three months' salary for failing to prevent salary arrears among health care and education personnel, but again he remained in office. It is also rumored that just before Niyazov's death, an epidemic swept through Niyazov's private livestock herd, killing a number of cattle. The veterinarian in charge of the herd was jailed, but again Niyazov did not remove Berdimuhamedov from his post. No explanation or theory has been offered how he survived these crises, other than the rumor that he is Niyazov's illegitimate son. (NOTE: Niyazov would have fathered him at 17. END NOTE.) More likely, it is possible that Berdimuhamedov's intellectual skills and cultural instinct enabled him to do the necessary political triage to preserve his position.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Berdimuhamedov is a complex combination of Soviet bureaucrat, traditional Turkmen tribal elite, and card-carrying member of the intelligentsia, which makes him very different in psychological makeup from his predecessor. His strong family ties and professional working style suggest that he has every intention of achieving something for Turkmenistan while he is in office, and is open to new ideas.

However, his unfamiliarity with substantial portions of the territory that comes with being president and his desire to proceed carefully point to a continued gradual process.

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